

Briefing: Alcohol and domestic abuse in the context of Covid-19 restrictions

In the wake of this global pandemic, figures already show an increase in domestic abuse reports around the world^{1 2}. Lockdown measures require people to stay at home, even when that home may not be a safe place for them. This briefing offers some considerations relating to alcohol and domestic violence during the restrictions placed on households as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

How is domestic abuse related to alcohol use?

Alcohol (and other drugs) do not cause domestic abuse. However, both perpetrators and victims of domestic abuse may drink alcohol. Research ([Gadd et al., 2019](#); [Graham et al., 2011](#)) shows that alcohol can:

- increase the risk of perpetrating domestic abuse
- increase the risk of being a victim of domestic abuse
- increase the severity of domestic abuse

What does this mean during the pandemic?

There is currently no data on the impact of Covid-19 on alcohol-related domestic abuse. However, we highlight the following concerns in order to ensure victims of such abuse receive the best possible care and consideration from health and social care professionals, policy makers and political leaders:

- Lockdown and the impact of social-isolation serves to increase the risk of experiencing physical, sexual, and other forms of abuse within the home, where abuse already exists, particularly when alcohol is a factor.
- Images of bare alcohol shelves in supermarkets go some way to show that 'at home' drinking is increasing during this Covid-19 pandemic when pubs and other social venues selling alcohol are closed.
- The inclusion of off-licences as essential businesses, while other social outlets are closed, may well increase the number of alcohol-related incidents more broadly, including domestic abuse and domestic homicides ([Morris, 2020](#)).
- For victims of abuse who are alcohol dependent, there is a risk that perpetrators may restrict their alcohol use as a form of control. This can have serious medical consequences if they go into sudden withdrawal including delirium tremens, hallucinations, seizures, and heart failure.
- Victims are less able to seek support from alcohol services due to the closure of many services and move to online support. While some substance use support services are still in operation during this pandemic, many services have had to restrict contact, including peer support groups.
- Victims of abuse who use alcohol or other drugs are less likely to access safe refuge because of movement restrictions. Most domestic abuse services are not well equipped to support women with alcohol or other drug needs.

How to respond?

We are calling on police, health professionals, social workers, neighbours, friends and other family members to look out for any signs of domestic abuse, particularly in the context of alcohol consumption, in order to maximise the chance of early identification and action.

- Where possible, be prepared to ask someone about their personal safety when you suspect there is domestic abuse or alcohol use – do this privately, in 1-1, not in front of family members.
- For people experiencing domestic abuse, let them know about the Women's Aid '[Silent Solutions System](#)'. When somebody calls 999, if the caller is unable to speak to the operator, the call is forwarded to an operating system.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-51705199>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/feb/13/female-homicide-victims-england-wales>

If '55' is pressed by the caller, the system will register this and the operator will transfer the call to the police as an emergency.

- While alcohol use may increase for some of the population, for others supply may run low and they may go into alcohol withdrawal. Both increased use of, and withdrawal from, alcohol pose serious risks to health and well-being where domestic abuse is present.

What can UK governments and policy makers do?

We support recent calls from the World Health Organisation that tasks policy makers with ensuring there is adequate financial support to essential domestic abuse services during the Covid-19 pandemic. We support their call to work with the domestic abuse sector to identify ways to support victims safely within the context of physical distancing guidance. We are also calling for the Treasury to ensure adequate funding is available to health and social care services supporting individuals impacted by their own or a loved one's alcohol use.

Links to key resources with Covid-19 specific information:

- Adfam – Covid-19 Top tips for families and loved ones of those with substance use problems
- Alcohol Change UK – Coronavirus: information and advice hub
- Collective Voice – Covid-19: Support for treatment and recovery services
- Respect – Helpline for perpetrators of domestic abuse
- SHAAP – Coronavirus (COVID-19) and People with Alcohol-related Problems: Recommendations for Services
- SSA – Resources for those working in the drug and alcohol sector
- Women's Aid – Safety advice for survivors.
- World Health Organisation – WHO has called on governments to ensure essential services are resourced and supported in the response to the predicted growth of domestic abuse cases as a result of Covid-19.

Additional information on domestic abuse and its relationship to alcohol

What is domestic abuse?

National UK charity Women's Aid defines domestic abuse as an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence. It includes, but is not limited to patterns of intimidation, degradation, isolation and control with the use or threat of physical or sexual violence, psychological or emotional abuse and financial or economic abuse.³ Most cases are perpetrated by men towards women, however, in some cases it is perpetrated by women towards men, or between same sex partners or ex-partners.

Perpetrators' use of alcohol

Not all perpetrators will use alcohol or other drugs, however, alcohol use is common among a high proportion of domestic abuse perpetration cases, with perpetrator substance use being found in half of the domestic homicide cases since 2011 (Gadd et al., 2019; Gilchrist et al., 2019; Rongqin Yu et al., 2019). Despite some perpetrators or victims believing alcohol is to blame for physical and sexual abuse (Polly et al., 2017; Galvani, 2006; Javid, 2015), alcohol use does not cause perpetrators to inflict abuse. Research shows that where a perpetrator is violent and abusive under the influence of alcohol, they are usually violent and abusive without it or use different forms of abuse when not drinking including intimidation, coercion, control and financial abuse (Galvani, 2006)

Victims' use of alcohol

The chances of being a victim of domestic abuse are higher in relationships where one or both partners use alcohol (Cafferky et al., 2018; Abramsky et al., 2011). However, care must be taken not to blame the victim for the abuse she receives. Victims may drink to cope with the experiences of abuse, both after an abusive episode and in anticipation of abuse. Alcohol may be used to grow closer with a partner, and it may be used as a gift from the perpetrator to the victim after an abusive episode. A victim's alcohol use may also be a reason for inflicting abuse by a perpetrator, or he may use the victim's alcohol use as tool in his control and coercion, for example, limiting the amount of alcohol they may have (Fox, 2018).

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³ <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/>